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ABSTRACT

For at least two kinds of literature instructors, classroom use of a film derived from a Shakespeare play is potentially promising: a Shakespeare course instructor can present one attempt to visualize the implications of the printed word, and a teacher of a course which compares film and literature has at least one respectable film adaptation of a literary work. Although for several reasons Olivier's "Henry V" is not the best film to use, it does have some advantages, including the utilization of a variety of modes which may be compared when studying ways of filming stage plays. In addition, this film offers several points for study when considering film as an interpretation of a play. (JM)

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Teaching the Shakespearean Film: Olivier's Henry V

Classroom use of a film derived from one of Shakespeare's plays seems potentially promising: it allows the instructor of a Shakespeare course to present one attempt to visualize the implications of the printed word; it provides a teacher concerned with comparisons of film and literature at least one respectable adaptation. Yet the films that are available are not always satisfactory to either kind of instructor. I have used various Shakespearean adaptations primarily for sophomore courses in film and literature, and have assisted or watched others use them for Shakespeare courses as well. On the basis of my experience, I'd like to discuss one such film, Olivier's Henry V, noting what may be done with it, and analyzing one facet of Henry's character that has not been treated in the criticism of the film. If the instructor understands what can be done with a film such as this one, he is more likely to be content with the result.

I do not claim this is the best film to use. The disadvantages are that the play itself is not one of Shakespeare's best, and the film, which is now nearly thirty years old, is beginning to date. These disadvantages are not to be dismissed lightly: King Henry of the play can be made into an interesting character, but he doesn't seem so to the students on the first reading. Certainly the themes of the play, all the political intrigue and patriotism, seem remote and irrelevant, although they can be brought to bear on contemporary issues. The

CS 201 967

film itself, despite its splashy colors, can be distracting, since the language difficulties are compounded by rapid speech and dialects. At times students react against the conventions of staging and filming that Olivier has adopted. In short, neither the film nor the play consistently command attention. Other adaptations -- such as the group of Hamlet films (Olivier, Konzintsev, Richardson), or the Romeo and Juliet set (Cukor, Zeffirelli, Castellani), or Midsummer Night's Dream (Dieterle, Hall -- students enjoy the old 1935 Dieterle version, even while laughing at it) -- all of these adaptations are more attractive. But all are groups of films, and money for a series of films is not always available. Henry V, at least, has the distinct advantage of utilizing a variety of modes, ranging from the literal recording of a stage play to outdoor action entirely freed of stage conventions, all in one film. It is easy to compare these modes, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of various ways of filming stage plays. There are also those subtle changes and deletions in theme and character that can prove helpful in guiding the student to a better understanding of the design of the play. Furthermore, a script is available (currently out of print) and there is considerable secondary material dealing with this particular film.[1] The film is also available for purchase, a considerable advantage if you have had any experience struggling with film rentals.[2]

Discussion about modes of adaptation can start with the kind of thesis that Geduld advances in his Filmguide. He contends that Olivier intentionally disparages the theatrical version, by suggesting that the actors modify the play to appeal to the audience. Geduld then details the transition into another mode, in which the background is an intentionally distorted two-dimensional representation. In Geduld's view,

the film is most successful in still another mode, particularly the battle scenes, which he calls a "succession of unforgettable images" (p. 44).

Students I have had, at least, do not generally agree with this kind of analysis, and I too suspect that the opposite view may be more tenable. The battle scenes are tin-plated ritual. Eisenstein's own methods did not produce the best results in Alexander Nevsky, and here, with the color distracting the viewer's perception of lines, planes, angles, and movement, the imitation is even less satisfactory. The scene becomes mere illustration, and does not evoke the kind of questioning that characterizes one's response to the rest of the play: here there are no questions, only answers. And as even Geduld notes, it is a most antiseptic conflict.

The most successful scenes, I think, are those which are played as drama. the camera becomes a recording device to capture the play as it is being performed on the stage. Sequences of this sort, that is, the opening of the film, are filled with an energy and movement that is lacking in much of the rest of the film. It is possible to discover here something else about drama, at least Shakespeare's kind of drama. It is not done in a vacuum; the audience is clearly a part of it. Characters turn their bodies as much to the audience as to themselves. It is easy for a student reading a play to consider it a self-enclosed unit, but there is a sense in which the play is consciously being acted out, performed, with space for audience reaction, with energies and rhythms induced not just by the characters themselves. Imaginative rhetoric is hardly realistic when conceived as an interaction solely between two characters, but when characters are often representing their

thoughts for the audience, rhetoric seems a more reasonable device. When Olivier defies the French ambassadors by threatening to "play a set/Shall strike the dauphin's crown into the hazard," (I,ii) we know that the lines are delivered to the audience as much as to the ambassadors; Henry is acting for our benefit. But when he declares before the battle of Agincourt, mounted in the midst of his troops, "He that shall live this day and see old age," (IV,iii) there is no audience in sight, other than the soldiers, and we sense he is merely theatrical for their benefit, posturing in a situation where the element of make-believe has been reduced.

Whether one sees the stage portions as the least or the most successful, it is still possible to analyze the success or failure of particular modes, to consider, for example, what effect the background has on Henry's wooing of Katherine. Noting the various critical opinions on the subject, Geduld concludes, "the realistic battlefield is Henry's world where he confronts the French with their hour of truth; the unreal palace is Katherine's world, and to woo and win her on her own ground Henry attempts what is unreal to him: the gallantries and flatteries of the courtly lover" (p. 62).

Another problem to work with is the effect of using the same kinds of comic gestures in different modes. Compare, for example, Pistol and the Boar's Head group in Act II, i with Pistol and Fluellen in Act V, i (the scene in which he is forced to eat the leek). In the first case the stylized gestures make sense on the stage; in the second, the same kind of gestures seem strangely dissipated in the semi-illusionistic background, and without audience reaction, the timing of various gestures seems arbitrary. It is, in short, interesting to consider whether

Olivier made the correct choices within the system he has established.

For instructors interested in the insight this particular film gives to the claim that films are a genre with possibilities and limitations different from those of drama or fiction, the film is also a challenge. Most film theoreticians assume that film as a medium is most successful when it is creating a new reality or capturing reality, not when it records directly the conventions of another medium. This film, nevertheless, seems to be an exception. The whole issue is handled extremely well in Bazin's What is Cinema? as part of Bazin's argument against the methodology of Eisensteinian montage.

For instructors interested in the film as an interpretation of the play, there are several points to consider. There is for instance the farcical treatment of Act I, i. The scene is certainly more interesting when played for farce, but one should consider what such a change does to the play as a whole. Other changes, the deletion of parts dealing with contemporary political situations, have been catalogued by Phillips and Geduld. I personally find the most important issue to be Henry himself. Even though the film and the play call attention to his virtues, certain basic questions need to be asked about him. Since this particular issue has not been dealt with in other critical articles, I would like to analyze it in some detail. The problems center around his apparent inability to see the way the church is using him, and his questionable motivation in undertaking the war.

In following the advice of the church to invade France, Henry seems oblivious to their designs. If he leaves, they will profit by forcing the death of a bill that would be costly to the financial state of the church. It would appear that Henry is insensitive to the quality of the

church's persuasion, for even the case itself, while possibly true, is presented pedantically. Even if Henry does not understand their political motivation, which would make him as remote as Nixon from his assistants, he should at least sense the windbag in Caunterbury, who obfuscates evidence by means of an interminable list of names, only to conclude that "as clear as is the summer's sun" (I, ii) Henry has the right to claim the throne.

Even more damaging to Henry, each explanation of his motivation, ~~it~~ seems to contain mention of his need for status, for glory, so that "history shall with full mouth/speak freely of our acts" (I, ii). For this glory he will spill the blood of the common man, an issue that reappears in Act IV in his disputes with Bates and Williams. And it would appear that his need for glory is motivated by a desire to prove, as his speech before the French emissaries who have brought him tennis balls shows, that his "wilder days" are behind him, and that now he "will rise there with so full a glory"/that (he) "will dazzle all the eyes of France" (I, ii).

These questions are basic to Henry's nature: they may represent his human side, which exists along with his nearly supernatural ability to charge his warriors to action, or they may suggest that Henry is not such a hero after all. All of these questions are raised in both versions. There are other "inconsistencies" that the film seeks to eliminate altogether. There are, for example, Henry's threats at Harfleur. He urges the French to give in because he may not be able to control his troops, and he urges in a peculiar way: he centers particularly on the fact that his men may mow "like grass/Your fresh-fair virgins." Several lines later he then questions what would happen "If your pure maidens

fall into the hand/Of hot and forcing violation," depicting more forcefully what his soldiers might do, and finally, piling on even more alliterative adjectives, he cautions the governor that he may see "the blind and bloody soldier with foul hand/Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters" (III, iii).

As part of the attempt of the Olivier version to purify and elevate war, these threats are omitted. But it is much harder to understand Henry without a key such as this speech at Harfleur. Henry is above all an actor: it is clear that his speech is a threat not necessarily to be carried out, for as he later says while despairing of acts such as Bardolph's pilfering, "nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner" (III, vi).

The role of the gamester is in fact central to Henry's strategy. It is in this role that he first responds to Montjoy, whose calm condescension draws not anger, like that he directed at emissaries who brought tennis balls, but instead understatement: "My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk; My army but a weak and sickly guard" (III, vi). The response is repeated again when Henry, outnumbered at Agincourt, revels in the power of his diminished army: "We few, we happy few" (IV, iii). Such passages are present in the film, but they seem flourishes rather than essential elements of his character. Once Henry is seen as a gamester it is easy enough to see how he could listen to Caunterbury and Ely and reach the same conclusion on his own, and yet not need to prove he knows they are fools. What is expected is not what the gamester needs to provide. He can seem the selfish glory-seeker

before the French, but it need not be his true nature. Reacting to a threat from the French, he will send them back tennis balls converted to cannon balls, but nothing he says need reveal his exact feelings and motivations. If he appears a glory-seeker, it is not to be taken as a revelation of his character.

That Henry should toy and tease is a conception that does not survive in the Olivier version. Those incidents where Henry may be acting, but is acting in a reasonably creditable way, are kept. But most incidents which anyone would question, such as the test for the traitors Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey, are omitted.

The interchange with Williams further demonstrates the way the film has altered the nature of Henry. Williams is allowed to make his charge--"when our throats are cut, he may be ransom'd, and we ne'er the wiser" (IV, i)--but John Bates intercedes in the film before Williams and Henry exchange gloves. Consequently, a scene which appears to threaten Henry's reputation, in the next act of the play, is then omitted. In the omitted portion, Henry gives Williams' glove to Fluellen instead of meeting Williams himself, and after the ruse is revealed, accuses Williams of abusing the king. Williams saves himself by arguing that the king was disguised, and for penetrating the gamester's design and standing up for himself rather than accepting an official but inaccurate interpretation, Henry fills the gloves with coins. Once again Henry's priggish concern for his person is revealed as a design, not a truth.

One can easily see the reasoning behind all of these omissions. The portions deleted are not inherently good drama, they are potentially misleading, and they make much the same point about Henry. But to leave them out is to shift attention from the essential mode of operation of the play, a mode

which calls all assertions into question, then satisfies the doubt. The film switches to a mode in which no questions are asked about the nature of war or the extent to which Henry is properly a king.

The mode of questioning dominates the play. From the very first time Henry is mentioned we are asked to evaluate unreasonable assertions about the king. When the archbishop asserts

> Never was such a sudden scholar made;
> Never came reformation in a flood,
> With such a heady current, scouring faults

we cannot help but wonder about his praise, for scholars cannot be made suddenly; the very analogy undercuts the assertion. The archbishop apparently believes in the change, but the word "seem'd" within the larger argument emphasizes a basic uncertainty. It is after all too much for him to believe. When Ely likens the change to strawberries, and the summer grass, growing "fastest by night," the metaphors again call into question the change.

In another sense it is not the change itself but those who perceive change who are called into question. Could such grasping and conniving prelates as Caunterbury and Ely come to terms with greatness such as Henry's? Could they conceive a subjugation of self to role, surely as necessary in a priest as in a king? These changes in perspective, these new insights into basic themes of the play are being constantly demanded by Shakespeare's own gaming, but it is a gaming the film does not reinforce with the insistence of the play.

The problem with removing or diminishing the importance of such subtle and constant questioning is to leave us doubts about Henry's behavior that are not so easily answered. The questions raised in the first act, such as the right of the king to wage war for his own glory,

still need to be answered, and the problem of why Henry cannot see through the prelates is further intensified by the farcical turn the film gives to this section. And when in the film version, Henry falls to wooing Katherine, we are more likely to be put off because we are not as aware of Henry's fascination with roles. The means for grasping the motive for the transition from warrior to suppliant is partly withdrawn, and the film risks breaking into wholly unrelated pieces. The structure of the film still makes sense, but a diminished sense. Stripped of the complete contrast to the Boar's Head group, and stripped of the necessity to go beyond Henry's overt reasons for his acts, the film often seems to be a ritual that no longer makes sense to the participants.

These assertions of mine should of course be questioned in much the same way that I have questioned Geduld's claims about the modes of adaptation. Olivier's Henry V, despite its age, contains a number of such issues, in particular the problems of modes and Henry's character, that can still make it a vehicle for lively discussion.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Roger Manvell's Shakespeare and the Film (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 37-40 deals with Henry V, as does James E. Phillips' article, "Adapted from a Play by W. Shakespeare," Hollywood Quarterly, 2 (October 1946), 87. There are two books dealing partly with Henry V that are worth further study: Manvell and John Huntley discuss William Walton's score in The Technique of Film Music (London, 1957), pp. 78-91. Andre Bazin makes several references to Henry V in volume 1 of What is Cinema? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) throughout the two parts of the chapters "Theater and Cinema." Bazin's general argument, carried out quite persuasively, is that film can successfully record "canned theatre," contrary to the claims of most theoreticians that film must always strive to be an independent art. The script for Henry V appears in Film Scripts One, edited by George P. Garrett, O.B. Hardison, Jr., and Jane Gelfman (New York, 1971). The book is currently out of print. Harry Geduld's Filmguide to Henry V (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) gives background information about the making of the film and analyzes the visual elements of the film. This brief 82 page book also contains an annotated bibliography, listing the reviews.

[2] Walter Reade has been offering the film for approximately $1500.